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I taught her to lie before she could spell her name. Told her people were soft, stupid, and always looking for a story that made them feel good about parting with money. Back then, our narrative was the plain truth: an amputee raising his kid on his own. Before long, we noticed how different people responded to different aspects of our lives. Our narrative then developed into a collection of short stories we kept at the ready. I curated those tales, and she delivered them with big eyes and borrowed grief. We weren't

thieves; not in our minds. Just realists cashing in on a world that stopped caring about people like us long ago.

*“Only a fool would put his hope in the compassion of strangers. It’s us or them, and it sure as hell ain’t gonna be us.”*

Back then, she just nodded. Lately, she doesn’t wait for me to speak.

We’re in some town; I don’t even remember the name. We never stay long. Too many faces recognize you, too many stories get recycled. So we move on.

June picks the marks now, and I don’t stop her. Not because I agree

with her choices, but because she makes them with precision, and pride. It used to be me. I'd scan the crowds the way I once scanned rooftops, looking for tells. Shaky hands, unfocused gaze, someone seemingly neglected. June was the hook. A girl with a welfare ruck three sizes too big for her; tremble in her voice. Maybe a fake bruise under the cheekbone, when we needed it.

"The guy with the cardigan. At the boardwalk," she says, peeling an orange.

"Why him?"

“Thinks the world still owes him something.”

“What’s the story?”

She shrugs. “Something tragic. I’ll improvise.”

There was a time I polished the lies. Refined them; cleaned them up. Now, June writes her own scripts. Better than I ever did. She always admired me. Even if I couldn’t look at her without remembering the woman she took from me.

By now, she learned everything I taught her and started adding her own. It wasn’t a game to her. It was art; a show. Every victim, a new

stage. But somewhere along the line, it stopped being for money. It was for me. June wanted me to be proud. And I was.

Her cons get sharper each time. One afternoon, she comes home from a run, smiling like she's just won a medal.

"You should've seen him," she says, tossing some bills on the counter like a trophy. "Tears down his face. Thought I was his niece from Pittsburgh."

I hear her talking to herself at night, practicing voices. Some little-girl sweet, some hollow and broken. Something she figured out

on her own along the way. One morning I hear her sing in a low, breathy voice:

*“Nana, please remember my name. I still sleep holding your frame.”*

It’s too good. Too cruel.

“You scare me sometimes.”

She grins like it’s a compliment. Another time we drive by a care home.

“Let me try something,” she says, grabbing my arm.

Says she’ll find someone lonely; someone slow. I stay in the car, engine idling, fingers tightening on the wheel. June walks in with her

scarf tied like a schoolgirl's bow.  
She finds a guy in a chair by the  
fish tank. Gray sweater; lost eyes.  
She kneels at his side.

I can see her mouthing *Grandpa*.  
His head lifts; confused, hopeful.  
She nods, her voice breaks. His  
hands tremble. She takes them.  
They talk. He weeps. Laughs. Takes  
off his ring and presses it into her  
hand. June kisses his forehead and  
walks out like she was born from  
the silence in that room. Back in  
the car, she rolls the ring across  
her palm.

"Solid gold," she says, looking at it.  
"Can you believe it? Sometimes I

feel like I could tell them anything and they'd buy it." She laughs, low and self-satisfied.

And there it is. A strange mix of pride and rot in my chest. I want to be proud. And I used to be. Until now. She reminds me of all the young, hot-headed boots back in the day. They'd discard the leash by week two. Drunk on power and the silence of command. Barely dry and determined to go out wilding in the village. Eager to do something. Everything. Anything devoid of order, structure, and rules.

And then there were others. The ones who'd gone feral. Lacking any



morals or remorse. Not looking at you, or even through you. Just profiling and scanning for weakness. Back then, I hated those types. The ones who stopped pretending they were human and wore it like a badge.

“You enjoyed it?” I ask. “The moment, I mean.”

“Yeah,” she says, turning her head. “Of course.”

That night I can't sleep. I watch the ceiling and think of the way her face lit up. How natural it all looked. She didn't just lie — she fed on it. Not just the money, but

the ease of manipulation; the victory.

I tell her we're leaving. No more cons for a while. June doesn't protest. Thankfully, doesn't even ask why. We drive west. Through small towns where most have little and those who do keep it close. We sleep in the car for three nights, and I don't speak a word. The silence stretches between us like no-man's-land. Neither of us willing to cross it. On the fourth, she asks if we're going somewhere in particular.

"No," I say.

We end up in a town by the sea. Cheap motels, weather-beaten storefronts, off-season quiet. A place seemingly forgotten by the world. We check in under new names and I tell her we'll find work. *"Something honest this time."* June just rolls her eyes.

I take a job helping around the dock and she disappears most days. I don't ask. One night she comes back late, knuckles scabbed. June doesn't say anything. I don't push. Later, I find her sitting in the bathroom, the door half-open, staring at her reflection.

“You hate me now, don’t you?” she asks.

“No.” Then, after a beat, almost without meaning to, I add: “You did nothing wrong.”

June doesn’t say a word. Just closes the door, and I stand there, stunned at the lie I’d said like I believed it. I don’t sleep. On the edge of the bed, I ponder how many times I reassured myself it was all for *her*. To feed her, clothe her. To keep her safe. But it was always for me. For my anger; my loss. And she took it all in. Let it fill her. Because she wanted me to see her. And I never did; never could.

Not the child, nor the student. Not even the echo of the woman I lost.

Now, for the first time, I see not just the damage in her, but the void. A space I carved out, piece by piece, and filled with my bile. She isn't me; she's worse. I told myself I had reasons: grief, betrayal, bills, pain. But her reason? *Me.*

That night, I pack. I leave her money and the keys to the car. Considering a note, no words come to mind, so I just walk away. Not because I don't love her. But because I finally do.